

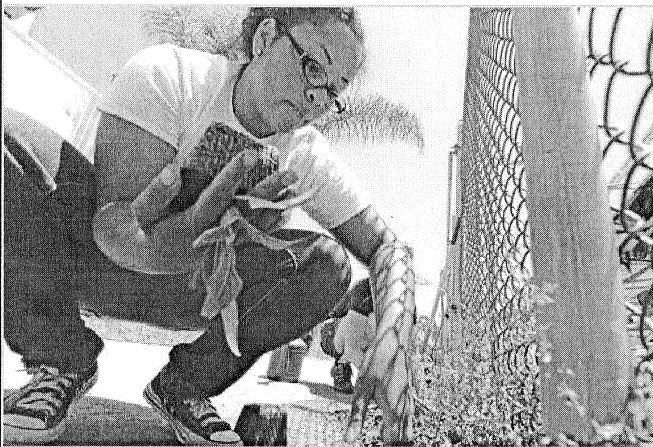
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An Investment in Youth

Federal stimulus dollars have put about 1,200 local teens to work in professional fields this summer in and around Long Beach amid one of the toughest job markets in memory.

By Kristopher Hanson and Carmen Hernandez, Staff Writers

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Brooke Nicholas helps place native plants at the Dunster Marine Reserve in East Long Beach under a program that gives teens workplace and job skills. (Jeff Gritchen, Staff Photographer)



Youth Employment Program worker Christian Jefferson helps build a greenhouse at Marine Stadium in East Long Beach. The city-run youth jobs program has been able to multiply its impact this summer thanks to about \$2.7 million in federal stimulus funding. (Jeff Gritchen, Staff Photographer)

Photo Gallery | Long Beach Seen Blog

LONG BEACH — Restoring wetlands, installing electrical lines, planting gardens, patrolling the ports.

Federal stimulus dollars have put about 1,200 local teens to work in professional fields this summer in and around Long Beach amid one of the toughest job markets in memory.

The youth job program run through the city experienced a nearly 400 percent increase in paid employment this summer thanks to some \$2.7 million in special federal funding.

For 17-year-olds Chris Martinez and

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Phyreoun Chea, the influx of cash offered an opportunity to earn some money and learn new skills working about 25 hours a week at the Port of Long Beach, where they're receiving a crash course on police work at the port's security division.

"There's a lot of ex-military people working with us, showing us how security is handled at the port, taking us to meetings, explaining reports and technology and taking us into the field," said Chea, a Poly High student who plans to join the Army after graduation in June.

Martinez, a senior at Millikan High this fall, said the program has exposed him to a new world.

"I'd say we're learning a lot," Martinez said. "The stuff that goes on here is pretty amazing, some of the equipment and how they have to operate to keep the port secure. It's been a good experience."

Other teens and young adults are working for entities that range from megacorporations like Boeing to small medical clinics and nonprofit organizations serving the homeless.

One group of teens that includes 17-year-old Jesus Mendez has been put to work tending greenhouses and restoring natural habitats next to Marine Stadium in Long

Beach.

Mendez said the job persuaded him to study environmental science at a California State University campus after graduation.

Lenny Arkinstall, their boss and a steward of the nearby Los Cerritos Wetlands, believes the stimulus dollars have been a great investment, however temporary it may be.

"They could be like any other kid and kick back for the summer and not do anything, but they're here," Arkinstall said.

The program that officially hired the youths, insured them and is handling the stimulus cash is known as the Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network, a semi-autonomous agency overseen by the City of Long Beach.

Pacific Gateway received about \$2.7 million to hire, train and counsel youths in Long Beach, Wilmington, Signal Hill and Lomita. It was given another \$3.7 million to work with adults and dislocated workers, and is keeping overhead as low as possible to fund an aggressive youth job placement program with ties to hundreds of local employers.

Because Pacific Gateway handles labor costs and workers' compensation insurance, employers aren't shy about taking on teenagers with little or no experience.

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Last summer, Pacific Gateway's director Bryan Rogers could afford to hire only 250 youths, with a few hundred more given unpaid internships and job training.

This year, not only are the teens and young adults getting schooled in the ways of the working world, they're getting paid.

"They're averaging about 200 hours each this summer, so that's real job experience, training and some money, whereas last summer a lot of them were placed in unpaid positions, which are beneficial for experience, but doesn't given them much financial incentive," Rogers said. "Getting that money was a blessing given the job market and competition for work being so fierce right now."

Gateway has also tutored the youths in work readiness classes that explain basic job expectations like attendance, punctuality, etiquette and work attire, said Kathy Parsons, a Gateway spokeswoman and program director.

Statewide, some 50,000 youths have been put to work this summer under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, also known as the federal stimulus package, which funneled about \$186 million to California's youth job programs, according to the California Workforce Association, a nonprofit that lobbied for the stimulus

dollars.

The state immediately took \$26 million of that to use for "discretionary grants" over the next year — money it will deliver to cities and counties for similar youth job programs — and within a few weeks had distributed the remaining \$160million to more than 40 agencies that included Gateway, said Jennifer Mitchell, policy director at Cal Workforce, which helped lobby for the money.

While authorities were told the \$160 million could be spent anytime through June 2011, an estimated 80 percent will be spent by mid-September, Mitchell said.

The rest will be spent during the school year or saved for next summer. At Gateway, director Rogers said the cash will supplement more than \$500,000 it received this month from the Environmental Protection Agency for job training in the environmental cleanup industry, which he's targeting at people 18 to 30 years old.

Mitchell said other agencies are fighting for more stimulus dollars and private grants, but are likely to receive just a fraction of the stimulus dollars they used this summer.

"My sense is that most of the cities and the agencies used most or all of the money this summer because the need is so great," Mitchell said. "I don't know what next

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summer is going to look like as far as job opportunities and training for (youth). A lot of teens might find themselves back flipping hamburgers and taking jobs like that, if those positions are even available."

In the meantime, most of the 1,200 teens involved through Gateway's program will continue in their roles until school begins this fall. As for summer 2010, budget pressures in Washington and Sacramento are likely to curtail the program significantly.

"We'll be pushing for a reauthorization of at least some of this funding, but first we need to prove to (Congress) that it's worth it," Mitchell said. "I think the facts will prove it was clearly a great program, but there's no doubt it's a tough sell among some (Congress) members who just want spending cut. But we feel these are programs worth every penny as investments in our future."

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Program at a glance

- What is it? Federal stimulus dollars are funding paid jobs for some 1,200 local

teens this summer in fields such as medicine, port security, wetlands restoration and media.

- How much? One local program that serves people in Long Beach, Torrance, Signal Hill and Lomita received \$2.7 million for youth jobs. The City of Los Angeles received about \$20 million. Statewide, about \$160 million was distributed from Washington, D.C.
- In there any private involvement? More than 75 local private companies are participating by hiring teens, including Boeing, Walgreens, Blair Commercial Real Estate and EyeLand Optometry.
- Who's overseeing the program? Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network, an arm of Long Beach city government, is handling the stimulus money, providing the teens with workers' compensation insurance and writing their paychecks. The employers, who include many nonprofits and government agencies, provide the job training and worksite.

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